DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 212 691 UD 021 683

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TITLE Urban Schools [Urban School Improvement Paper 2.]
SPONS AGENCY Horace Mann Learning Center (ED), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 26 Jun 80
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Strategies for Urban School Improvement Workshop Series (Washington, DC, June 26, 1980). For related documents, see ED 179 647 and UD 021 682.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role; Case Studies; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Needs Assessment; *Parent School Relationship; *School Community Relationship; *Teacher Role; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS *New York City Board of Education; New York School Improvement Project

ABSTRACT

This report describes the first phase of a School Improvement Project which is currently being implemented in the elementary schools of New York City. The project's design is described as the bringing together of parents, administrators, teachers, community people, and auxiliary staff to write a school improvement plan which could be implemented and subsequently bring about more effective instruction. The report explains the first phase, which consisted of the researching of assessment needs in nine schools categorized as improving, maintaining, or declining schools. The involvement of parents, teachers, and administrators in cooperative planning; the development of curriculum materials; the eventual implementation of new educational strategies; and the provision of information to the School Improvement Project Committee are cited as the reasons for the assessment. (ML)

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"URBAN SCHOOLS"

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June 26, 1980

STRATEGIES FOR URBAN SCHOOL
IMPROVEMENT WORKSHOP

Sponsored By

The Education Forum Branch
Horace Mann Learning Center

in cooperation with

The Office of School Improvement

U.S. Department of Education

UD021683

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His prior experience has included development of a Pupil Information System for New York City in cooperation with the State Education Department of New York, and management of the Reading is Fundamental Project, a city-wide, K-12 reading program in New York City. He has served as Special Assistant to the Director of the Center for Reading of the New York City Board of Education and Assistant to the President and Vice President of the New York City Board of Education. In addition, he was a classroom teacher for seven years in the New York City area on the pre-school, kindergarten and elementary level.

Dr. Loughran's research interests include the effects of administrator attitude, teacher attitude and work environment on achievement; and violence in the urban elementary school. Dr. Loughran holds a Ph.D. from Fordham University in Administration, Policy and Urban Education, a P.D. from Fordham in Administration and Supervision, and an M.S. from Long Island University in Education.

I bring you greetings from the Big Apple, with bruises -- we are in the middle at this point, I guess. I guess we can always get a little defensive about the effective and ineffective schools. But since in the city we have approximately a thousand buildings, I think, we have several of each.

The School Improvement Project in New York City is approximately a year and a half old right now. It is the culmination of one that was begun in East Lansing and Detroit, Michigan by Ron Edmonds and several other researchers. The focus of that work was the identification of factors that make for successful schools. The Search for Effective Schools, as the project was called, is now being run from Harvard. They have isolated five factors that they feel make for successful schools. They are: strong leadership and administrative style, school climate, ongoing assessment of pupil ability, an emphasis on basic skills and professional expectation of pupil ability, which is perhaps the most sensitive. The work has been underway for eight years.

When we got the new Chancellor in the New York City Public Schools, Frank Macciarolla, he visited several of the campuses, Harvard, Columbia, and a number of the other universities. He attempted to find new models, research, that could be applied in his administration. Fortunately, at the same time in New York State, we had also gotten a new Commissioner from the State. They have been working well together. We have been able to secure funding for different projects that the Chancellor has identified as priorities. The Chancellor met Ron at Harvard, was impressed with the research and findings, and invited Ron to come to New York City to be his Senior Assistant for Instruction. At that time I was given the research findings and asked to design a School Improvement Project utilizing these five factors.

What we have done is designed a project which calls upon all the members of the school community -- parents, administrators, teachers, community people, auxiliary staff -- to come together to write the School Improvement Plan which is then implemented, the bottom line of which, of course, is more effective instruction. But, before we could really implement the beginnings of the school-site planning groups we proceeded to do case studies.

The case studies were done for a couple of reasons. They were done to, first of all, develop instrumentation for a needs assessment series which each school undertakes. They were done to train staff in needs assessment methodology. And, they were also done to validate Ron's five factors in the New York City Public Schools. The case studies were done a little over a year ago. We worked in nine schools throughout New York City. We looked at three categories of schools; improving schools, maintaining schools, and declining schools.

We feel we were successful on all three counts that I mentioned previously: the training, the development of instrumentation, and also, on the validation of Ron's factors in New York City. Most importantly we found that improving schools were characterized as having those five factors present to a certain degree. When this case study phase ended, we went into our assessment phase.

Perhaps I should do a quick review of the structure of the City school system for those of you who aren't familiar with it. In New York, we have slightly less than a million students, eight to twelve. I think Central Ed now claims 90,000 children alone, which I think is quite a number. We are decentralized at the K-9 level. We have 32 community districts. The special ed functions and the high school are still centralized. We have approximately 110 high schools. We have 500 some odd elementary schools. And the intermediate school setting is either intermediate or junior high depending on the district.

We are working in elementary schools only, for the time. October 1st we hope to bring the School Improvement Project into the intermediate school level. Last fall we hired what we call trained school facilitators or school liaisons. They were staff members, most of them coming in from New York City Public Schools, teachers that we took out of classrooms. Their function is to go into individual schools, assess the schools, lead the staff through the process to help develop, under the leadership of the principal, the improvements for the planning group, after the assessment, to provide the focus, the ongoing staffing, to the development of the school plan, and, then, which is something that we are beginning in the fall, an implementation phase where the resources and the needs that have been identified will be addressed.

The school liaisons have been most successful. In fact, we had a planned session on Monday with the Chancellor and the nine planning groups all around the city. Two of the schools have requested the full time services of a facilitator. One of the problems that we do run into is the supplanting of staff. We are not there to supplant the assistant principals or the role of the principal. I think one of the key questions is how can you bring a change process or a long range planning process to an individual elementary school, and after a certain period of time, whether it be a year, year and a half, two years, what process can you leave behind that is going to enable that school to continue improving itself? We have gotten a lot of pressure to provide staff to schools but it is something that we will not do. The facilitator is there as staff through the process only.

The assessment period usually takes around ten weeks. Initially when we were designing it, we figured that we could do it in five or six weeks. That is not the case, because we are a centralized project going out to individual schools that are decentralized to review. We're bureaucrats, like many of the people in the room, I am sure. We have to go through a certain period of accommodation to prove to the school staff that we are not there just to drink their coffee and eat their cookies. So as a result, what we have done when we send the liaison in, is to make a point of telling them to find small things that they can be successful with for the staff immediately, whether it be payroll problems, some physical problem in the school, getting curricula bulletins, whatever it may be, helping write mini grants or proposals. Prove to the staff that you are there to help.

By the way, the requirements for these individuals are I think, perhaps, two. Number one they have an extremely strong background in basic skills. The facilitator, preferably in reading, but also in math, has to be capable of doing in-service work, writing proposals, doing curriculum design work and in addition to that they have to be superb diplomats. In the city schools we obviously have some of the strongest unions in the country. The type of work that we are doing is threatening to them, there is no doubt about it.

We are working with each school as an individual school. By design we are trying to be as flexible as possible. That doesn't necessarily always correspond with the wishes of the different constituencies. Yet as we go around the city working different schools we find such varying conditions that superintendents and principals wouldn't be accepting of the process that wasn't as flexible as possible.

The assessment period this past year was a rather lengthy one. We learned an awful lot. We go into a school. We distribute questionnaires. We have it as paper free as possible. And, certainly, it is really a top priority, as is designing the implementation, whether it be multiple choice or a questionnaire that can be answered in 10 or 15 minutes or an interview. We really have to take the paper work burden on ourselves. (We have copies of the questionnaires). In this first assessment period, we went through very much of a narrative format where we wrote a 50-70 page document describing the perceptions of the staff and school on parents, community. But we won't be doing that in the fall. Rather in the fall we will be doing a more statistically oriented assessment, utilizing tab sheets and item analyses of the interviews.

Quite frankly, the purpose of the assessment is to present to the committee, to get it off the ground. We are not there to evaluate; we are really there to get the school focusing in on the five factors, plus other concerns. So, by writing a 60 or 70 page narrative, what we are really doing is getting ourselves into a lot of controversy over wording and specific items et cetera. It is much easier just to present the facts as they are reported to you on the questionnaires and on the interviews.

Then the same type of analysis has to be undergone, where the liaison or the facilitator has to present these sheets and items to the group and lead them through discussion. It may not sound like a topic that is worth 4 or 5 minutes of a talk, but believe me you are basically removing a lot of subjective data that might creep into more of a narrative report. And you are presenting the perceptions of the staff as they are reported to you. It was a major issue in the past year.

When the plan is written it is drawn not only from these assessments. We also have enough flexibility that we are not locking the individual committee into those five factors. If the staff has a major problem with some other factor, whether it be mobility or class size et cetera, we work on that and the school plan as well as one of the major factors. In presenting the five factors around the city to superintendents, parents' groups, teachers' unions, community groups, class size is the only other issue that has really been raised, and that is by the union.

So, people are really looking for framework. And that is all we consider the five factors to be, a framework. I think I could just as easily go in with a list of ten factors and ask the schools to rank those that are the most important to them, seven out of ten, whatever. The most important thing is to get the different constituencies in a room talking, communicating, to get teachers involved in the development of curriculum materials and selections of materials to try to get more parental involvement, to focus in on different areas, to work to administer the problems in the schools.

Obviously, one of our major problems has been the selection of the schools. You can't just go into any school and mandate change. The schools have volunteered. We sent out a Chancellor's memorandum, and approximately 42 schools volunteered within a two or three day period for the program. We selected ten, initially. One school has dropped out. We are working with nine right now. And, as I mentioned, before October 1st, we hope to go into another ten schools.

I would say that having gone through the assessment process, and now having completed our first draft of the plans, (several of the committees are on the third draft of the plan) two characteristics in particular have been stressed by the committees and I think there is a reason for it. Emphasis on basic skills instruction and ongoing assessments have been items that time and time again have appeared first in the plans. That is great.

People with schools -- one school has nine basal readers in it -- they say fine. We would like to articulate a curriculum not only within grade but between grade. I think there is a reason for it. I believe that basal readers or math kits, et cetera, are a very safe thing to talk about because they don't touch the individual classroom. The same with an ongoing assessment, if people have a mastery, or mastery planning system, or some kind of an information system.

Once again, I think, the more difficult areas to touch on, obviously are professional expectations of people abilities and covenants of the school in general leadership style. By the way, we do not mandate or even recommend any particular style of leadership. In some instances democratic style is most appropriate to meet the needs of that particular school. But in other cases an autocrat might be in order. We do not recommend any particular style. We try to work with each group, each school as it comes to us.

For the future, we will be working in September and probing two groups of schools. This first group will be going into the implementation phase where they have completed the major assessment and their plan. This summer we are analyzing the plans.

We are negotiating with the school over resources, and by the way, we will have very little to offer the individual school to a large degree. The schools who have budget difficulties in the city will have to make do with what they have. Yes we can supply some things, basal readers, perhaps, three, four, five, six thousand dollars per school. But the school will have to make a commitment, we are not just giving it to them. Beyond making the materials available now, the school will have to make a commitment over the following

two years to supply, or support, or whatever is installed. If we give them the basal reader this fall right up front, fine. Then we will have to take their textbook money, and other reimburseable sources and support it to the tune of 25 percent over two years. I think it is important that the school make a commitment, that it is not just another giveaway.

The nine schools that we have assessed and planned, we are negotiating their resources over the summer. We hope to install those resources, whether it be technical assistance materials, et cetera, in September. Some of the schools won't be ready in September. We will have to have more feedback back to the committee whenever they are ready.

The second group of 10 schools will begin approximately October 1st. They will then begin their assessment, the paired up accommodation assessments planning. And, perhaps, towards the end of the year we will be getting towards developing resources for them as well.

I will say this. In the training as we develop the program, who are we going to draw on? People that are in the schools? Well, we don't want those bureaucrats from downtown. They have been there too long. They don't understand what is happening in the schools. We are pleased. I think the stuff we have is rather unique. I was able to have the opportunity to hire. Eighteen original people called. I wasn't given any restrictions on the hiring. We had to select. For the liaisons alone, we went through 650 resumes, and selected 12 people. We actually interviewed about 173 persons so it really was an exhausting search, and the quality of the people is really superior. I think it is important that they are fresh out of the classroom as well, because conditions are changing so quickly in the school with moral and physical concerns that they really have to have that day-to-day understanding of the classroom situation, the conditions that exist in the schools.

The type of schools we were in were not just Title I schools. We were in all types of schools and all types of settings. We have schools that rank perhaps 500 out of 650 on the reading reports. And, we have schools that rank number 70 from the top. We have schools that have 1,350 pupils in a turn-of-the-century building, 80 percent Dominican Hispanic. Two schools that are almost literally white with, perhaps, 350 pupil children in a building.

We, by design, are taking one elementary school from each of the 32 districts throughout the city. We are in nine right now. We will be entering one more school from each of ten districts in October. Whether or not we will have additional funding to expand the program to all 32 districts we don't know at this point. I think the interesting point for us will be in the fall. We will be entering the intermediate school; we will be developing new instrumentation and a new process for the intermediate level as well.

So, from the projects' point of view, we feel we have been successful this far with assessment. With the planning to develop a methodology we have learned, and we are now looking forward to going into a new level.